DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 473 812 TM 034 801

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TITLE	The Effects of the Inclusion of Special Needs Student Scores on ISTEP: Indiana's Graduation Qualification Exam.
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	17p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Achievement Tests; *Exit Examinations; Grade 10; Graduation Requirements; *High School Students; High Schools; Special Education; *Special Needs Students; State Programs; Test Results; *Testing Programs
IDENTIFIERS	Indiana; *Indiana Statewide Testing for Educ Progress

ABSTRACT

This study compared tenth grade scores on the Indiana Statewide Testing for Educational Progress (ISTEP) assessment in the Lafayette School Corporation in mathematics and language arts. The sample was taken from a high school with a total enrollment of 1,990 students, 296 of whom were considered special needs students. Data were gathered for the 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001 school years. The ISTEP was instituted as a graduation qualification examination in 2000. The study analyzed the effects of including special education students' scores in ISTEP results. Ex post facto research was used to compare data from the comparison years to the treatment and posttreatment years. Findings indicate that the inclusion of special needs students did not have a significant effect on ISTEP scores. (Author/SLD)

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The Effects of the Inclusion of Special Needs Student Scores on ISTEP: Indiana's Graduation Qualification Exam

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ABSTRACT

This study compared 10th grade ISTEP scores in the Lafayette School Corporation in math and language arts. Data was gathered from 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001 school years. ISTEP was instituted as a graduation qualification exam in the year 2000. This study was instituted to analyze the effects of special education students being included in the ISTEP scores. Ex post facto research was used to compare data from the comparison years to the treatment and post-treatment years. It was concluded that the inclusion of special needs students did not have a significant effect on ISTEP scores.

BACKGROUND OF THE PROBLEM

ISTEP is the state's standardized testing system for public and private school students. It was created fifteen years ago as a method of assessing student performance. It has only been in use as a graduation qualifying exam, or GQE, since 2000. One significant factor, which emerged when ISTEP became an "exit" exam, was the requirement that all students, including students with disabilities, were required to pass ISTEP in order to receive a diploma. The inclusion of the scores of special needs students contributes to inaccurate testing means, due to the fact that these students test lower due to little, or no, background knowledge of the subject matter tested.

Why have a GQE?

Twenty of the states now employ a GQE, and another eight plan to adopt one with the next three years. (O'Neill, Farr and Gallagher, 2002). According to federal and state laws, all children must be included in large scale testing regimens, including those with disabilities.

The recent emphasis on "standards-based reform" for defining common standards which can serve as the basis for what should be taught and what children should be expected to know, according to O'Neil, et al (2002), has led at least twenty of the states to implement high school exit exams. They further explain that, at the same time, "those concerned with learning disabilities and other special education advocates have widely supported a policy of "inclusion" for students with varying learning needs. In an inclusive setting, children with special needs participate in the mainstream schooling experience and are encouraged to meet high expectations and achieve positive

educational outcomes." Special needs students are allowed the use of adaptations and modifications as outlined in their individual education plans (I.E.P.) when taking exit exams.

One aspect not taken into consideration by O'Neill et al. (2002), is the fact that students with more severe learning disabilities, mildly mentally disabled students and students with any of the numerous range of identified disabilities, are also required to pass ISTEP in order to receive a diploma. Even though these students are allowed certain adaptations and modifications in taking the test, they often do not have the background knowledge, or even exposure, to much of the material in either the language arts or the mathematical portions of ISTEP.

The statement that adaptations and modifications, if listed in the child's individual education plan, are available when taking the exam is not fully true. While a student may have the adaptation in their I.E.P. that all tests may be read, during ISTEP the adaptation is stated that tests may be read according to law. In actual practice, this means that only questions and directions may be read. The student may then be required to read selection that is several pages in length, and then answer comprehension questions. The selection is often as much as five to seven years above the student's age equivalency reading level.

Exit Options

Although the majority of Indiana high school students pass the graduation qualifying exam, there are still several other options available in order to obtain a diploma. According to the Indiana Department of Education (1998), these options include:

- Complete the Core 40 curriculum with no grade lower than a C in an y required or directed elective course and; have the principal's recommendation; or
- Complete all of the following:

--Maintain a high school attendance rate of 95% (excused absences do not count against the student)

--Take the test in English and/or mathematics at least one time every year it is offered (general education students only)

--Participate in remediation opportunities provided by the school

--Earn a C average in the courses comprising the 22 credits specifically required for graduation (eight credits in English, four credits in mathematics, four credits in social studies, four credits in science, and one credit each in health and physical education)

--Obtain a written recommendation from an English and/or mathematics teacher who documents that the student has attained the skill levels in English and mathematics. (In the case of a special education student, the case conference

committee makes this recommendation in consultation with a subject area teacher.) DOE, (1998).

The documentation process for special education students in Lafayette School Corporation is actually quite detailed. The teacher of record for a special needs students must have actual samples of work submitted over the past four years. This work is then aligned with the required standards. The student must show proficiencies in at least 75% of these standards. In order to do so, the teacher of record must, at least in part, depend upon detailed record keeping by the student's mathematics and language arts teachers of the last four years. The teacher of record must then present documentation, usually along with a check list of accomplished proficiencies, to the case conference committee commonly comprised of the student, the teacher of record, language arts and mathematics teachers, the principal, and a special services specialist. The decision on the obtainment of a waiver is then made as a case conference decision.

There are also other exit options. It would be possible to include, as a modification, that special needs students are not required to take ISTEP as a graduating qualifying exam. This was essentially the case before the graduating class of 2000.

Indiana offers a "certificate of completion" to those students who do not pass ISTEP, and are not able to fulfill the requirements of a waiver. The certificate of completion is not accepted by most places of business who require a diploma as a term of employment, nor is it accepted by technical or post-secondary schools with the same requirements

"Many states offer students with disabilities an alternate way to earn a standard diploma." O'Neill et.al (2002) went on to list some of the alternatives. "In most cases, the state allows modified coursework to count the same as standard coursework; in some cases completion of the IEP program is considered sufficient to earn a standard diploma."

Public Outcry

The problems associated with the establishment of a graduation qualifying exam are numerous. Children, especially children with disabilities, fail in large numbers. Students are dropping out of school or moving to states without the required exams. "Cheating is also believed to be proliferating in the wake of these tests, not only on the part of anxious students, but by teachers and school districts that also face severe repercussions for poor student test performance." O'Neill et al (2002).

Many parents feel that these tests should be abandoned. Damage to the child's self esteem and the pressure of performing are cited by parents as reasons for abandoning the test.

The very real problem that teachers must narrow the curriculum and "teach to the test" certainly exists. Teachers are forced to teach concepts included on the ISTEP, while basic life skills—especially needed by special needs students—are often ignored. In some states, the testing programs have been abandoned due to the backlash of parents.

ISTEP+ in Indiana is currently under legal challenge by advocates for children with disabilities. "A civil liberties group is seeking an injunction which would permanently exempt children with disabilities from the requirement that they pass the exam in order to receive a diploma. An Indiana court recently refused to dismiss the suit, which is among the first to challenge the application of an exit exam to children with disabilities." O'Neill et al. (2002).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The graduation qualification exam is a fact of life in Indiana. Whether it is fair, whether it should be applied to all students, whether it is an accurate determinant of needed qualifications in order to receive a diploma, is open to debate. All students must take the graduation qualification exam in order to receive a diploma.

Many, if not most, special needs students do not have the background knowledge needed in order to successfully pass the ISTEP+ graduation qualification exam. The inclusion of special needs students in the corporation data on students passing the ISTEP would negatively affect the overall scores. This would provide an inaccurate representation of corporation scores.

For the purposes of this study, a directional hypothesis was tested: The inclusion of special needs student scores on corporation wide ISTEP scores will negatively affect the overall scores in the corporation. If special needs student scores are included in ISTEP data, overall scores could be lower.

METHODOLOGY

The sample for this study consisted of 10th grade students' grades on the ISTEP tests of mathematics and language arts in the Lafayette School Corporation for the years of 1998-2001. The Lafayette School Corporation encompasses a seven square mile area and includes one high school, two middle schools and eleven elementary schools, with a 2001-2002 enrollment of 7,045 students.

Jefferson High School, from which the sample was taken, has a current enrollment of 1990. The enrollment has dropped slightly over the past six years, while overall student enrollment in the corporation has remained stable. Jeff is a comprehensive public high school whose students and staff are served by a faculty and staff consisting of 132 certified staff members, 76% of whom have at least a master's degree, as reported by the Professional Based Accreditation Report (PBA) 2002.

The school's population can best be described as urban with 337 minority students, which make up 17% of the student body. The school corporation also houses the Greater Lafayette Area Special Services (GLASS), a special education cooperative serving students from throughout the county. The number of students served by GLASS has increased to 296 students, an increase of more than 3% the past six years. This population includes learning disabled, mildly mentally disabled, moderately mentally disabled, emotionally disabled, and a severe and profound disability group.

Additional information provided by the PBA report includes the data that Jefferson High School has an attendance rate of 94.4% and a graduation rate of nearly 81%. Approximately 56% of graduates pursue a four-year college education and another 5% plan to attend a two-year college.

Students in 1998-1999 are the comparison group. Beginning in the year 2000, all students were required to take ISTEP as a graduation qualification exam. Students from the 2000-2001 school year are the experimental group.

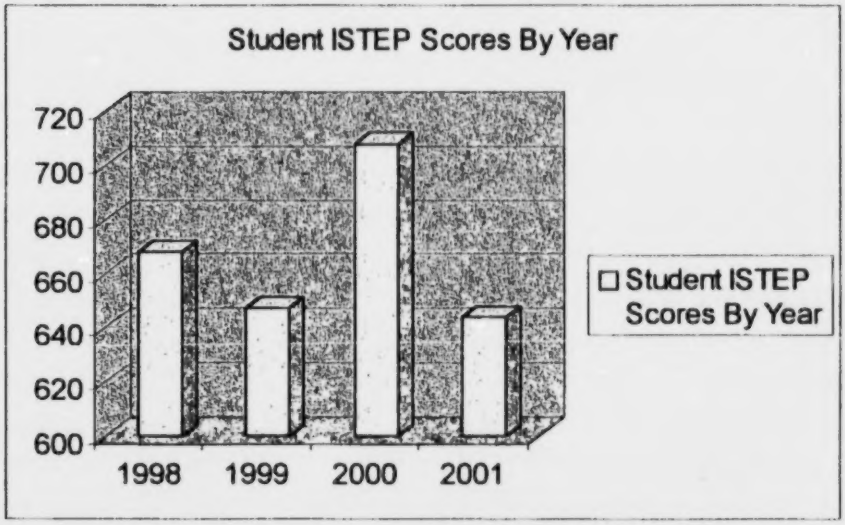
This study used a pre-treatment, post-treatment approach. It compares ISTEP scores from before the implementation of ISTEP as a graduation qualification exam, to data collected after implementation of the GQE.

RESULTS

The results clearly show that ISTEP scores went up rather than down after ISTEP was instituted as a graduation qualification exam. The independent t score was 0.694 with a standard deviation of 18.8 with 6 degrees of freedom. The probability of this result, assuming the null hypothesis, is 0.513.

The 1998 and 1999 scores, before the GQE, had a mean of 338 with a 95% confidence interval for the mean of 315 through 361 with a standard deviation of 18.5.

In the years of 2000 and 2001, after the GQE, the mean was 329 with a 95% confidence interval for the mean of 305.7 through 351.8 with a standard deviation of 19.2.



The chart and table show a comparison between the combined language arts and mathematics scores for the two years prior to the GQE and the two years since ISTEP was required in order to receive a diploma.

Years	Mean	Standard Deviation
1998-1999	338	18.5
2000-2001	329	19.2

DISCUSSIONS, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For the purposes of this study, the effect of the inclusion of all student scores, including those of special needs students, in total corporation wide ISTEP scores was measured by comparing the scores for two years prior to the implementation of the graduation qualifying exam to those of the first and second year of implementation. The directional hypothesis, which was that the inclusion of special needs students' scores would negatively affect overall ISTEP scores, must be rejected.

The results came as a surprise, due to the fact that special needs students do not usually have the background knowledge or exposure to the material on either the language arts or mathematics portions of ISTEP. The following could possibly account for the results:

1. In anticipation of the GQE, more emphasis was placed on standards based teaching. Teachers began "teaching to the test."
2. Remediation programs were instituted and required if students chose to pursue a waiver.

Whether or not special needs student scores affect overall ISTEP scores, the controversy over the requirement of a graduation qualifying exam remains. Indiana may join other states such as Arkansas where children are no longer required to pass tests that were found to be too difficult. Wisconsin also backed away from plans to impose high stakes exit exams due to backlash from parents. (O'Neill, et al, 2002). The current injunction being sought by a civil liberties

group in Indiana to permanently exempt children with disabilities from the requirement that they must pass the test in order to receive a diploma could affect the future of the graduation qualification exam. Perhaps, in the future, all students, regardless of ability or disability, will no longer require the graduation qualification exam.

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